

Rural Policing in Humboldt County: Lawlessness Ignored?

The Humboldt County Sheriff's Office Mission Statement:

We, the members of the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office, are committed to providing competent, effective, and responsive public safety services to the citizens of Humboldt County and visitors to our community, recognizing our responsibility to maintain order, while affording dignity and respect to all persons, holding ourselves to the highest of professional and ethical standards.

SUMMARY

In August 2016, the Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury (HCCGJ) received a complaint describing unacceptable levels of crime and a sense of lawlessness occurring in the outlying areas. Upon investigation, the HCCGJ uncovered statistics from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) supporting such claims. According to FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Data violent crime in the unincorporated areas of Humboldt County is on the rise, increasing two and a half times from what it was in 2012, and exceeding the national average for the first time in years. According to statistics gathered from 2005-2014, Humboldt County has the highest arrest rate in all of California, and crime has steadily increased since 2010. Public awareness and involvement have helped make public safety a priority again in our rural communities. This prioritization has led to increased funding for public safety, yet is enough being done?

The HCCGJ commends the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) for expanding its coverage and outreach to the rural areas with a community-policing-based approach thanks in part to Measure Z funding. This expansion has been slow with many setbacks for a variety of reasons including a lengthy hiring process and various staffing issues. Residents have reported to the HCCGJ that crime continues unabated because those committing these crimes are empowered by the perception that law enforcement will not respond when called.

This Grand Jury focused on several areas of improvement to better serve the public and their perception of safety. These include ensuring rapid 911 response times, the speed of the hiring process and improving staff retention of the HCSO, and further collaboration with local Tribal Police agencies. Most importantly, the HCCGJ calls on the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors to seek a permanent source of funding to replace and increase upon that which Measure Z temporarily provides.

GLOSSARY

BOS: Board of Supervisors

FBI: Federal Bureau of investigation

HCCGJ: Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury

HCSO: Humboldt County Sheriff's Office

BACKGROUND

In response to citizen complaints from rural areas in Humboldt County regarding the combination of poor county services and minimal responses of law enforcement, fire and social services, the Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury (HCCGJ) conducted an investigation into the perception of a deficiency of services offered. For purposes of this investigation, the HCCGJ chose to focus on law enforcement services in these areas.

Complainants claimed that crime in the rural areas of Eastern and Southern Humboldt County was not being addressed by the Sheriff's Office. Residents claimed that when called, the Sheriff's Office would not send deputies to the area in a timely fashion and, sometimes, they would not come at all. When a deputy did come to the area, the deputy would merely do a "drive through" which in the eyes of the citizenry did little to dissuade criminal activity. Residents reported fears of retaliation from criminals in their area should they call law enforcement, and that they felt the Sheriff's Office was doing nothing to protect them. In Eastern Humboldt County residents describe a culture of "lawlessness" which prevails due to the lack of law enforcement services.

In 2014, the HCCGJ released a report titled "Rural Safety," which outlined the need for a renewed effort to improve public safety in the outlying areas of our county, specifically concerning fire and emergency services. The HCCGJ at that time recommended that 20% of Measure Z funding be applied towards rural fire and emergency service providers. In response, the Board of Supervisors (BOS) authorized 25% to be set aside for said services.

During that time, citizens living in our rural areas began enlisting the help of government officials, i.e., the County Sheriff and Fifth District County Supervisor, to address these issues. As a result, many "Community Meetings" commenced in Southern and Eastern Humboldt. For instance, a series of "Orleans Public Safety Community Meetings" were held from 2011 to 2016 to address ongoing unresolved problems pertaining to that area. These meetings were organized by the Orleans Volunteer Fire Department and were attended by various local officials and concerned citizens. To address the various concerns of the citizens living in these areas, promises were made by County officials to provide resident deputies, additional social services, and more assistance with code enforcement.

A complaint was filed with the HCCGJ on August 23, 2016 alleging that, despite the concern expressed during the community meetings, citizens in Eastern Humboldt still cannot get law enforcement to respond, and continue to live in fear, not only of crime and criminal behavior, but also of retaliation and intimidation from reporting such crimes. The HCCGJ at that time felt the complaint warranted an investigation and has led to the writing of this report.

METHODOLOGY

In preparation for this report, the 2016-2017 Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury:

- conducted interviews with concerned citizens and public officials
- conducted a comprehensive review of Humboldt County policies, procedures, annual budgets, current law enforcement and response records
- reviewed and compared past Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury reports and reports from several other California county civil grand juries related to rural policing policies
- reviewed the Humboldt County Sheriff's Policy and Procedures manual
- attended a public meeting regarding Measure Z expenditures

DISCUSSION

Policing Humboldt County's Rural Areas

Approximately two thirds of the population of Humboldt County live in rural or unincorporated areas. The Humboldt County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) provides law enforcement services for the outlying areas. Due to a severe economic downturn combined with the unusually slow recovery, the HCSO has suffered budgetary reductions since 2008, resulting in many positions being cut. Coverage to the outlying areas, including resident deputies and substations in Garberville and Willow Creek, was eliminated.

Measure Z

In 2014, the passage of Measure Z allowed for tax money collected to be spent specifically on public safety. According to the official County of Humboldt website, in April of that year Humboldt County citizens told the Board of Supervisors (BOS) they were concerned with the lack of funding that is available for public safety services. In November of that year voters responded by passing Measure Z, a half-cent sales tax to pay for maintaining and enhancing services. One of the promises of Measure Z was to increase law enforcement specifically in Southern and Eastern Humboldt. The HCSO has expanded their coverage and service in a variety of ways. They have been able to "unfreeze" 30 previously vacant positions and add new deputies, including resident deputies in Orick, Bridgeville, and Orleans. They have reopened the Garberville and Willow Creek substations, and now have a new crime tip line for Eastern Humboldt. They are in the process of applying for funds for two Community Service Officers in Eastern and Southern Humboldt. However, the process of applying for and receiving such funding takes time and effort on behalf of the various agencies that depend on this process. This illustrates the importance of continuous and permanent funding for public safety in our region.

A Lengthy Hiring Process Leads to a Perceived Lack of Police Service

After approval of funding to actively recruit and hire for new and presently unfilled positions, the HCSO must comply with state mandates to ensure that only those best-suited for positions are hired. This can be a long and cumbersome process, often taking more than one year. Due to the obligatory and necessary strict standards of recruitment, few actually pass the rigorous background checks, which includes a voice stress test and psychological, written, and oral exams.

Once recruited, new hires without prior experience are subject to a lengthy training process, including successful completion of courses at a police academy (a 23-week program) and an 18-month training program under the direction of a Field Training Officer (FTO). It has been difficult to attract lateral hires (transfers from other departments) due in part to lower pay rates than other counties. An historically high turnover rate, not uncommon among law enforcement in smaller counties, means that aside from hiring for new positions, existing vacant positions need to be constantly filled.

These factors regarding the hiring process, coupled with a high turnover rate, illustrate the need for a review of recruitment and staff retention by the HCSO.

Slow 911 response

The HCSO main station is located in Eureka. Humboldt County covers a large area, therefore response times from the main station to the outlying areas can sometimes take more than two hours, longer if a deputy is not immediately available. Many residents have reported to this Grand Jury that this lengthy delay to service calls emboldens those committing crimes. It is hard to imagine being the victim of a crime in progress knowing it may take hours for help to arrive, if at all. The HCSO has been taking the necessary steps to address this issue by reopening substations located in the rural areas, and for this they are to be commended. However, another area of concern regarding 911 calls is the lack of cell service in our rural areas. This can be problematic not only for citizens trying to call 911, but for the responding deputies who need to keep in contact with dispatch at all times. The HCSO currently does not have satellite phones to assist in these instances. Acquiring emergency technology such as these phones may improve public and officer safety.

Cooperation with Tribal Police

The various local Tribal Police in Humboldt County are a valuable resource to assist with improving law enforcement response to the rural areas. The HCSO claims to have a good working relationship with these agencies and engages in the process of cross-deputization between agencies. On March 22, 2016, the HCSO reinstated peace officer powers for the Hoopa Valley Tribal Police and is actively working on the cross-deputization of officers between the two agencies. Cross-deputization will allow law enforcement agencies to work together cooperatively and provide mutual assistance to enhance public safety efforts despite jurisdictional barriers. This Grand Jury feels an effective collaboration between agencies can be beneficial and cost effective for all involved and should be made a priority to better serve the citizens of Humboldt.

FINDINGS

- F1. Rural areas of Humboldt County are being seriously underserved by law enforcement and other emergency services.
- F2. The Humboldt County Sheriff's Office has improved law enforcement coverage for all of Humboldt County through Measure Z funding, and these changes must be sustained with a source of permanent funding in order to avoid a discontinuation of these vitally needed safety services.
- F3. The Sheriff has not been able to immediately deploy increased numbers of deputies, due to state-mandated recruitment and training practices.
- F4. Long response times to 911 calls, no matter what the reason, not only jeopardize public safety but lead to a distrust and disconnect between law enforcement and the citizens they are entrusted to protect.
- F5. A lack of modern communication equipment can lengthen law enforcement response times and impede officer safety.
- F6. Public safety could be improved if the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office enhanced practical working relationships with various local Tribal Police agencies through greater communication and collaboration, such as cross-deputization of Tribal Officers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors increase funding to the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office to greater serve our rural population. (F1)
- R2. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors find a permanent funding model to replace the temporary Measure Z funds the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office relies upon, which expire in 2019. (F2)
- R3. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office conduct a comprehensive review of its hiring procedures and staff retention protocol and, as much as possible, take measures to streamline and enhance these processes. (F3)
- R4. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office conduct a thorough evaluation of 911 calls and response times and actively take measures to improve this valuable function for the safety of our citizens. (F4)
- R5. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office consider the purchase of modern emergency communication equipment such as satellite phones to enhance the safety and response times of deputies. (F5)
- R6. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office actively pursue ways to engage in greater communication and utilization of local Tribal Police agencies, in order to increase and enhance public safety for our rural areas. (F6)

COMMENDATIONS

The Humboldt County Sheriff's Office should be commended for its recent efforts in increasing law enforcement coverage, especially to the rural areas of Humboldt County.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal code section 933.05, the Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- The Humboldt County Sheriff's Office (R1 R2, R3, R4, R5, R6)
- The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors (R1, R2, R3 R4, R5, R6)

INVITED RESPONSES

- Hoopa Valley Tribal Chairman and Tribal Council (R6)

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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